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Tāla,puṭa Sutta

The Tāla,puṭa Discourse | S 42.2/4:306-308
 Theme: How an actor-dancer became a monk
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2006

1 Tāla,puṭa

Tālapuṭa or Talapuṭa lived in the time of our Buddha and was trained from his youth as an actor. Steadily, his fame grew until he became the dance manager (*naṭa,gāmanī*) of a travelling theatrical troupe of “five hundred women” (general figure which means a large company), travelling and performing all over ancient India. These five hundred gave dramatic performances of great splendour in towns, villages and royal courts, winning much fame, wealth and favour.¹

It was when Tālapuṭa was in Rājagaha that he hears of the Buddha, and decides to visit him. He asks the Buddha if it is true that performers who delight large audiences are reborn among the laughing gods. But the Buddha is reluctant to answer. Only after being asked three times, the Buddha tells Tālapuṭa that those who arouse sensuality in others will be reborn in hell [§7]. Tālapuṭa weeps to think that the older actors should have deceived him [§8]. Having heard the Buddha’s teaching, he enters the order and in due course becomes an arhat.²

The word *tāla,puṭa* means “palm-leaf box.”³ The Saṃyutta Commentary says he obtained his name from his bright and cheerful facial complexion, like that of a ripe palm-fruit (SA 3:102). In his lay life he must have been a gifted poet and, with this ability, composed his own inspiring elder’s verses (Tha 1091-1145).⁴

2 Why some renounce

People do not always become monks or nuns for good reasons. Some put on the saffron robe because of love failure, loss of relatives, sickness, or loss of wealth. **The Susīma Sutta** (S 12.70) recounts the time when the order had grown in popularity and wealth, so that outsiders, such as the wanderers, surreptitiously joined the order to find out the “secret” of the Buddha’s success!⁵

But there are worse reasons: laziness and desire for wealth, power, comfort, pleasure, or luxury, since a monastic of the world is often well provided with at least the basic necessities of life, and often given monetary and material donations, and feudal piety.⁶ There were such monks and nuns even in the Buddha’s latter days, and they are even more common today. Only they have become more sophisticated and respectable today.

Tālapuṭa tells us the real reason why he becomes a monk, and in the process, indirectly refers to some of the wrong reasons for doing so:

- 33 Not for lack of luck nor from shamelessness,
 nor on a mere whim, nor from banishment,
 nor for the sake of livelihood, did I go forth—
 therefore I’ve listened to you, O mind. Tha 1123

¹ SA 3:102; ThaA 3:143 f. ThaA summarizes Tāla,puṭa’s story as recorded in S 42.2 (ThaA 3:144).

² S 4:306 ff; Tha 1091-1145; ThaA 2:155 ff.

³ Baskets and cases woven from palm leaves are common in south and southeast Asia. The best known here is the coconut-leaf case for the *ketupat*, a popular boiled rice dumpling from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei often served during festivities and eaten with local *satay* (grilled diced meat on little sticks). For details & illus, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ketupat>.

⁴ SD 20.9.

⁵ S 12.70/2:119-128 = SD 16.8.

⁶ By “feudal piety,” I mean an unquestioning and subservient loyalty and obedience to a person, reflective of a cultish or feudalistic lord-serf relationship. Such a pathological relationship is always rife with problems of psychological transference and a hotbed for various improprieties and scandals.

He does not become a monk because he was a failure in lay life; in fact, he was a very successful layman. He is not driven into monkhood because some rajah has banished him, nor because he is a fugitive on account of some crime. It is not that he has a weak mind or is at a loss on what to do with his life. It is because he agrees with the wisdom in his own mind and gives up worldly life.

He has seen how difficult it is to practise the Dharma while living a household life. Suffering and pain arise in the mind, and it is right there that it should be worked on and solved. Mindfulness training—observing the true nature of all his actions—is what will calm his mind so that wisdom arises. The most conducive environment to do this is as a member of the spiritual community (*saṅgha*), and so he decides to become a monk.

3 Are dancing and acting wrong livelihood?

The Tāla,puṭa Sutta recounts how Tāla,puṭa the dance manager questions the Buddha on the fate of dancers who entertain others. He has heard that such dancers, because they amuse the people, are reborn in the heaven of laughing devas [§§3-5]. The Buddha’s answer is very clear:

In the past, manager, when beings are not free from lust, ⟨from hate,⟩ ⟨from delusion,⟩ who are bound by the bondage of lust, ⟨of hate,⟩ ⟨of delusion,⟩ a dancer on stage or in a show would entertain them with lustful ⟨hateful⟩ ⟨delusive⟩ themes arousing greater lust ⟨greater hate⟩ ⟨greater delusion⟩.

Thus, being intoxicated and heedless himself, he intoxicates others and makes them heedless, and having done so, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he arises in the laughing hell!⁷...

For a person of wrong view (that such entertainers will be reborn amongst the laughing devas), there is only one of two destinies: either hell or the animal realm, I say.⁸ [§§6-7]

The Commentaries take pains to say that the “laughing hell” is not a special hell for actors, but merely a part of Avīci where the foolish actors are tortured by having to replay their parts—like a Sisyphian task⁹—acting, dancing and singing, and being “cooked” at the same time (SA 3:103). The point is that what we habitually do or think of are what will *become* us.¹⁰

It is important to note here that the guilty party consists of those whose motivation is rooted in greed, hate or delusion, that is, the performers themselves, *and* those who subscribe to such an idea. Implicitly, it means that this excludes those laity (it should be stressed here, only the *laity*, not the monastics) who perform shows or on stage with a mind of charity, lovingkindness and wisdom. (Novices and monastics are bound by the rules that prohibit giving such performances, and even watching them.)¹¹

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⁷ “The laughing hell” (*pahāso nāma nirayo*). Comy: There is no separate hell with this name. This is actually a part of the Avīci hell where beings are tortured by replaying their parts as dancers dancing and singing, and “cooked” in the process. (SA 3:103)

⁸ See **Kukkura,vatika S** (M 57) for a similar passage, about a wrong view regarding humans *behaving* like animals, leading to like rebirth (M 57.1-6/1:387-389).

⁹ In Greek mythology, **Sisyphus** (Σίσυφος) was a king, the craftiest of men (who killed guests and divulged secrets of the gods), punished by being chained in Tartarus (an underworld between heaven and earth). Through his wiles, he escaped a number of times, and refused to return to the underworld. When finally caught, he was made to slave in Tartarus by pushing a huge boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll down again, and to repeat the task for eternity. The French author, Albert Camus, in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), sees Sisyphus as personifying the absurdity of human life, but concludes, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” as “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”

¹⁰ See an interesting story of **Isi,dāsī**, on the karmic fate of one obsessed with sex: **Why Some Marriages Fail** = SD 3.8(I).

¹¹ Further, see **Yodh’ājīva S** (S 42.3/4:308 f) = SD 23.3 Intro.

The Tāla,puṭa Discourse

S 42.2/4:306-308

1 At one time the Blessed One was staying in the squirrels' feeding ground in the Bamboo Grove near Rājagaha.

Tāla,puṭa's question

2 Then Tāla,puṭa the dance manager approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One, he saluted him, and then sat down at one side.

3 Seated thus at one side, Tāla,puṭa the dance manager said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst dancers in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus,

‘For a dancer on stage or in a show, who entertains and amuses the people with truths and untruths,¹² after death, with the body's breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas.’¹³ What does the Blessed One say about that?”

“Enough, manager,¹⁴ let it be! Don't ask me that.”

4 For a second time, Tāla,puṭa the dance manager said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst dancers in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a dancer on stage or in a show, who entertains and amuses the people with truths and untruths, after death, with the body's breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas.’ What does the Blessed One say about that?”

“Enough, manager, let it be! Don't ask me that.”

5 For a third time, Tāla,puṭa the dance manager said this to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have heard it being said amongst dancers in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a dancer on stage or in a show, who entertains and amuses [307] the people with truths and untruths, after death, with the body's breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas.’ What does the Blessed One say about that?”

“Surely, manager, I'm not getting through to you¹⁵ when I say, ‘Enough, manager, let it be! Don't ask me that.’ But still, I will answer you.

The Buddha's answer

6 In the past, manager, when beings are *not free from lust*, who are bound by the bondage of lust, a dancer on stage or in a show would entertain them with lustful themes arousing greater lust.¹⁶

In the past, manager, when beings are *not free from hate*, who are bound by the bondage of hate, a dancer on stage or in a show would entertain them with hateful themes arousing greater hate.

¹² Woodward renders *saccālikena* as “by his counterfeiting of the truth” (S:W 4:214). Comy however takes it as a dvandva: *saccena ca alikena ca* (SA 3:103), which is followed by Bodhi (S:B 1333 & 1448 n335).

¹³ *Yo so naṭo raṅga,majjhe samajjamajjhe saccālikena janam bhāseti rameti, so kāyassa bhedā param,marañā pahāsānaṃ devānaṃ saḥavyataṃ uppajjati ti.*

¹⁴ *Gamaṇi*, usu tr as “headman,” but here it form part of the cpd *naṭa,gāmaṇi*, “dance manager.”

¹⁵ *Addhā kho tyāhaṃ gāmaṇī na labhāmi.* ‘*alam gāmaṇī tiṭṭhat'etaṃ mā maṃ etaṃ pucchī ti.* The sentence *addhā kho tyāhaṃ gāmaṇī na labhāmi* lit tr something like “I cannot get the way to you.” This cautious response lit tr something like “I cannot get the way to you,” or fig, “You don't seem to get it!” On a number of other occasions, the Buddha similarly hesitates to answer such questions: see **Tāla,puṭa S** (S 42.2.5/4:305 f) = SD 20.8 n; **Yodh'ājiva S** (S 42.3/4:308 f) = SD 23.3; **Ass'āroha S** (S 42.5/4:310); by a brahmin youth: **Assalāyana S** (M 93.4.7/2:148) = SD 23.11. **Bodhi** notes that here the present tense is required, and suggests we follow Be & Ce *na labhāmi*, where Ee & Se have the aorist is appropriate, *nālattham*. (S:B 1148 n336). Thus he tr it as “Surely, headman, I am not getting through to you.” Actually the aorist, if taken as a participle, is also correct, which I have followed.

¹⁶ *Pubbe kho gāmaṇī, sattā avītarāgā rāga,bandhana,baddhā, tesam naṭo raṅga,majjhe samajja,majjhe ye dhammā rajanīyā te upasamharati bhiyyo sarāgāya.* “Lustful themes,” *dhammā rajanīyā*. Bodhi has “titillating things.”

In the past, manager, when beings are *not free from delusion*, who are bound by the bondage of delusion, a dancer on stage or in a show would entertain them with delusive themes arousing greater delusion.

7 Thus, being intoxicated and heedless himself, he intoxicates others and makes them heedless, and having done so, after death, with the body’s breaking up, he arises in the laughing hell!¹⁷

But, if he were to hold such a view as this: ‘For a dancer on stage or in a show, entertains and amuses the people with truths and untruths, then after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas,’ this is a wrong view on his part.

Now, manager, *for an individual of wrong view, there is only one of two destinies: either hell or the animal realm, I say.*¹⁸

8 When this was said, Tāla,puṭa the dance manager cried out and burst into tears.

[The Blessed One:] “So, manager, I’ve not got through to you when I say, ‘Enough, manager, let it be! Don’t ask me that.’”

9 “Bhante, I am not crying because of what the Blessed One has said to me, but because I have been tricked, cheated and deceived for a long time by those dancers in the ancient lineage of teachers, thus, ‘For a dancer [308] on stage or in a show, entertains and amuses the people with truths and untruths, then after death, with the body’s breaking up, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas.’”

Tāla,puṭa renounces the world

10 “Excellent, Master Gotama! Excellent! Master Gotama! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, were to reveal what was hidden, were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way, in numerous ways, has the Dharma been made clear by the Blessed Gotama.

I go to the Blessed Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May I, bhante, receive the going-forth (*pabbajjā*) under the Blessed One; may I receive the ordination (*upasampadā*).”

Then Tāla,puṭa the dance manager received the going-forth and the ordination in the Blessed One’s presence.

Tāla,puṭa becomes an arhat

11 And, the venerable Tāla,puṭa the dance manager, not long after was ordained, dwelling alone, aloof, diligent, exertive, and resolute, having right here and now realized for himself through direct knowledge, after attaining, dwelt in the supreme goal of the holy life, for the sake of which sons of family rightly go forth from the household life into homelessness.

He directly knew: “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what had to be done, there is no more of this state of being.”¹⁹

And the venerable Tāla,puṭa the dance manager became one of the arhats.

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¹⁷ “The laughing hell” (*pahāso nāma nirayo*). Comy: There is no separate hell with this name. This is actually a part of the Avīci hell where beings are tortured by replaying their parts as dancers dancing and singing, and “cooked” in the process. (SA 3:103)

¹⁸ See **Kukkura,vatika S** (M 57) for a similar passage, about a wrong view regarding humans *behaving* like animals, leading to like rebirth (M 57.1-6/1:387-389) = SD 23.11.

¹⁹ On this para and the next (the attainment of arhathood), see **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9.56b/1:203) n = SD 7.14.

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